

University of Groningen

Not so happy birthday

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M T Brück

M A Orr (Mrs John Evershed), astronomer and Dantist

The delightful photograph of Mr and Mrs John Evershed in Kashmir (*Astronomy & Geophysics* 38/2 7) is a reminder of her role as a partner in her husband's astronomical adventures over more than 40 years of married life. Readers may not realize that Mrs Evershed, under her maiden name M A Orr, achieved independent recognition in a different field – as an expert on the astronomical allusions in the work of the great Italian poet, Dante. Her book, *Dante and the Early Astronomers* (1914) remains a standard authority on the subject.

When Mary Orr was about 20, she and her younger sister were sent to complete their education in Florence, where they studied and fell under the spell of Dante's poetry. Mary in particular was fascinated by the astronomical allusions found in the *Divine Comedy* and other writings, which demonstrate the poet's familiarity with Ptolemaic astronomy and cosmology as interpreted by 13th century philosophers and theologians. Her interest culminated in the book which she wrote in Kodaikanal during the early years of marriage. As it was in a large measure the fruit of her earlier life, she used her maiden name. At the same time, no doubt in deference to the convention of the time, she wished to include her married name. She therefore styled herself "M A Orr (Mrs John Evershed)", though for her normal astronomical work she was "Mary Evershed" or "Mrs John Evershed".

The book went unnoticed by Dante scholars for 30 years until the Italianist Barbara Reynolds came across it by chance on the shelves of the Cambridge University

Library. "From then on," she recalls, "I was able to explain the astronomical references to my students, instead of saying, as T S Eliot did, that they don't matter and you can skip them." Again by chance, Dr Reynolds, making enquiries on another matter at the Cambridge Observatory, met David Thackeray (later Director of the Radcliffe Observatory, Pretoria). Dr Thackeray was Mrs Evershed's nephew, son of the sister who had shared her studies in Florence. Dr Reynolds visited the Eversheds at their home in Surrey, and after Mrs Evershed's death, with the encouragement of Mrs Thackeray, brought out a new edition of the book (1956, now also out of print).

The writer Dorothy L Sayers, at the time translating the *Divine Comedy*, was introduced to *Dante and the Early Astronomers* by Dr Reynolds. She described it as "quite the best guide available to Ptolemaic astronomy and to Dante's handling of celestial phenomena". Miss Sayers did not live to complete the translation of the *Divine Comedy*: the last 13 cantos and the commentaries of the third volume, *Paradise*, are translated by Barbara Reynolds. In the complete translation, published by Penguin, readers may find in the copious commentaries an account of Dante's cosmology as explained so lucidly and charmingly by M A Orr.

The library of the Royal Astronomical Society possesses a copy of each edition of M A Orr's book. I thank Barbara Reynolds for permission to quote from a letter with her reminiscences of Mrs Evershed. M T Brück, Craigower, Penicuik, Midlothian EH26 9LA.

John North

Not so happy birthday

Why the endless fascination of the English-speaking world with James Ussher's 4004 BC? Not of course because he wrote in English – by and large he preferred Latin – but because by an accident of history his date for Creation was added to the *King James Bible*. As the millennium approaches (or recedes, according to taste), it might not be a bad idea to ponder the existence of the scores of

equally serious estimates made before Ussher's time. Without trying very hard I can scrape up about 90, ranging between 3616 BC and 5626 BC. But I ought to add that none is easy to pin on an atheist.

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Andrew Scott

Roger Tayler remembered

I write in response to reading of the passing away of Prof. R J Tayler in the April/May issue of *Astronomy & Geophysics*. Prof. Tayler was my supervisor for an MSc project in 1991 on the chemical evolution of spiral disks. He was very precise mathematically and capable of great creativity. Even though at the time I knew him his health was already bad, his dedication to his subject and determination showed

in all he did. On one occasion, while delivering a lecture on stellar structure, he felt unwell and had to take a seat. However, he continued to lecture while seated. His contributions to stellar nucleosynthesis and the theory of the origin of the chemical elements were immensely valuable, and he is sorely missed.

Andrew Scott, Flat 4, 1 Sallymount Avenue, Ranelagh, Dublin 6, Republic of Ireland.

Raymond Hide

Percival Lowell, Clyde Tombaugh and the naming of Pluto

Unique in the annals of 20th century astronomy is the discovery in 1930 of Pluto by Clyde William Tombaugh, working as a young man at the Lowell Observatory in Flagstaff, Arizona (see Joseph D Zund's recent obituary of Tombaugh, *Astronomy & Geophysics* 38/2 38). The many names first suggested for the new planet included Athene, Atlas, Constance, Cosmos, Cronus, Erebus, Freya, Hera, Hercules, Icarus, Lowell, Odin, Pax, Persephone, Prometheus and Zeus (see Patrick Moore, *Sky and Telescope*, November 1984, pp400–401). It was an 11-year-old English schoolgirl, Venetia Burney (whose brother had earlier proposed the names Phobos and Deimos for the satellites of Mars), who suggested "Pluto", in keeping with the custom of taking names of the planets and satellites from Greek or Roman mythology.

Tombaugh turned his attention to

the largest planet in the solar system after moving in 1955 to the New Mexico State University in Las Cruces, where he started a programme of observations of Jupiter.

In 1964 I visited Las Cruces and joined in one of the observing sessions. Talking on that occasion about his early work, Tombaugh seemed pleased that those charged with naming his famous discovery had managed, possibly unintentionally, to incorporate into their choice, not only the first two letters of his surname, but also the initials of the founder of the observatory where the discovery was made, the wealthy New Englander Percival Lowell. It was of course Lowell who, in 1905, initiated the search for a new planet beyond the orbit of Neptune, so brilliantly brought by Tombaugh to a successful conclusion a quarter of a century later. Raymond Hide, Jesus College, Oxford University.



An apology

In the previous issue, (38/2) we inadvertently gave the incorrect credit for a picture on page 20. This picture of the arc over Svalbard was in fact taken by Richard Thomas. We apologise for the mistake; anyone wishing to reproduce this or similar pictures should contact Planet Earth Pictures Ltd, The Innovation Centre, 225 Marsh Wall, London E14 9FX, who are responsible for the reproduction of Dr Thomas's pictures.